

January 17th, 2021

John 1:43-51 “Good News for Who?”

Well, if you can believe it, we are three Sundays into 2021. My goodness. Exciting times. It's been awhile since I've said this, but that's probably because I repeated it so often last spring and summer, but we are in a shift. The empires of the earth are disintegrating making way for the integration of God's reign. Please remember that. That is our hope in troubling times. The text we have in front of us this week is the Gospel of John's version of Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael to follow him. He's inviting them to be his disciples. Now ... before we get too far, let's figure out what a disciple is, especially since we call ourselves the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ.) For our purposes this morning, let's say a disciple is someone who carries out the teachings of another. Since we are Disciples of Christ, that means we carry out the teachings of Jesus. So when *we* call others into discipleship, we're calling on *them* to follow Jesus' teachings too. We're inviting them to live like Jesus.

Notice that Jesus didn't mess around when he asked people to follow him. “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’” Period! Not, “Hey there Philip ... if you don't have anything better to do, do you think ... maybe ... that you might be interested in you know ... following me?” That sounds more like a shy high school kid asking someone to the Prom. Jesus was more direct. “Follow me.” So lesson one this morning is that the act of calling someone into discipleship is *not passive*. It is *active*.

But the church can be so passive sometimes! Especially when it comes to calling people into discipleship. And it's not always because we're lacking in faith or conviction or anything like that. We just have this idea in our minds that we shouldn't be pushy. We don't want to be like “those” churches who, because of their pushiness, have lost so much credibility. The irony there is that a lot of them are pushy because

they're *seeking* credibility. Go figure. Consequently, in our efforts to distance ourselves from the "pushy" churches, we swing to the opposite extreme of the pendulum and don't bother to say anything at all. But honestly folks, if we believe that we *have* good news to share, we should *want* to share it, right?

But here's the irony of Jesus' good news. Some people are *not* going to think its good news at all! In fact, some people are going to see it as a *threat*. In Luke's gospel, chapter 4, verse 18 and 19 Jesus went to his hometown synagogue and laid out his plan for ministry, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Good news, right? For sure. These are Jesus' words, and that's what we're all about in the church. The church recognizes Jesus' words as good news, and so therefore we are called to proclaim the good news.

Okay, but who *isn't* going to think this is good news? If the news is good for the captive, it's not going to be good for the captor. If the news is good for the poor, it's not going to be good for those who become rich at the expense of the poor. If it's good for the oppressed, it's not going to be good for the oppressor. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus is going to shake things up. Calling others to do the same is going to shake things up even more. Calling others into discipleship is risky. It can even be dangerous. The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, arguably the most visible preacher in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) these days, receives death threats. Why? Because his plan for ministry is the same as Jesus' plan for ministry when he proclaimed those words in his hometown synagogue in Luke 4! And he calls others to do likewise, because Rev. Dr. William J. Barber takes discipleship seriously.

When we become disciples ... when we take on the mission and ministry of Jesus, a big part of our task is to become involved in the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is bringing two adversaries

that are apart together. Jesus came to reconcile humans to God and to reconcile humans to each other. That can get you into a lot of trouble.

I'd say, "If you don't believe me, ask the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," but unfortunately we can't because Dr. King paid for his convictions with his life. Martin Luther King Jr. was a reconciler. His work and ministry went beyond achieving equal rights for both black folks and white folks ... his work and ministry included reconciling the *relationship* between blacks and whites too. For all people of all races in fact. History tells us that he was quite successful in his goal of *changing the laws* that held people of color captive as second class citizens. But what about people's attitudes? That's where we may run into some differences in opinion. Hey, it's not easy to change laws, but not nearly as difficult as changing attitudes. That's when forgiveness becomes an important component in the ministry of reconciliation.

But what's one of the most common things that we've all heard people say when it comes to forgiveness? "Let's just forgive and forget." We are so bent on quickly moving past the uncomfortable and unpleasant aspects of conflict that we neglect to do some of the difficult work that needs to happen in order for reconciliation to take place. What if instead of, "Forgive and forget," we say, "Remember and change?" See, the difference? That's transformative! You're not just sweeping things under the rug and charging on ahead without dealing with the real issues. Instead you're saying, "Let's figure out a way to make sure this doesn't happen again." You're looking ahead to the future so that you don't repeat the mistakes of the past.

We talk a lot about reconciliation in the church, and that's good. But notice when we're talking about reconciliation in the church, we tend to talk about addressing differences like, "Should we put the communion table up on the chancel or down on the floor?" Remember that one? We can even manage to agree to disagree *with other churches* when it comes to different worship practices. "Yeah, we have differences when it comes to when and how we take communion, and what a person has to

do to become a minister, but we can still get together for Christmas Eve service every year! We can come together for Lenten season services!”

The harder work comes when we start addressing things like, “What does it mean to be a church that welcomes *all people* regardless of their race, language, citizenship, gender-identity, ethnicity, social status, education, economics, religious background ... *whatever?*” These are things that have been at the center of some serious conflicts both in our culture and the church. At the heart of every conflict, though, is the question: “Who am I and do I matter to you?” The message in the gospel is, “All people matter.” The hard work for us comes when we have to listen deeply and take part in deep conversation. Honest to goodness reconciliation takes a *lot* of patience and listening which I think gets overlooked as a core spiritual discipline.

But what about communicating with people that are so different than us that it doesn't seem like we're even speaking the same language? What about those who are so far on the other side of some cultural divide that we can't even imagine how they come to a conclusion about an issue. If we are casting our relationships only to those who think like us, we tend to reduce the message of the Bible to, “just get over it and let's be nice to each other.” Martin Luther King addressed this when he said, “Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude. We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.”

How do we live with clarity about who we are, yet in relationship to people who *aren't* like us at all? It's going to require more time to actually work through issues ... and not as an opportunity to “just get rid of them,” but as an opportunity to increase our level of relationships. Jesus was constantly reaching out across the lines of division to what some people would consider “the enemy camp.” No surprise there when you consider that he taught, “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you!” See, this kind of love is enormously challenging because in order to reach across these racial, cultural, spiritual, political,

and economic divides, you've got to recognize that the one you are in conflict with has something of God in them.

“Shhhh oh my word Jesse, please ... we can't talk about stuff like that in church! It makes people uncomfortable!” Well ... Jesus said and taught things that made just about *everybody* uncomfortable! Jesus' teachings are hard! That's why it's not easy being a disciple. That's why it's not easy to call people into discipleship. But again ... here it is. That's what we're called to do when we say, “I want to follow Jesus.”